

International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



Book Review

Jeff Ferrell (2018) *Drift: Illicit Mobility and Uncertain Knowledge*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Stanislav Vysotsky

University of Wisconsin, United States

Late modernity is characterised by a condition of instability: the dislocation of development and gentrification, the precarity of part-time and contract employment and the relocation of refugees from war and ecological devastation. It is precisely this condition that Jeff Ferrell seeks to theorise in *Drift: Illicit Mobility and Uncertain Knowledge*. According to Ferrell, 'drift' is a state of being and consciousness—a diagnosis and prognosis. Organised into three sections, this work outlines the theoretical model of drift, presents case studies of drifters through the history of hobos, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and contemporary train hoppers and argues for a distinct methodological approach. Although the conceptualisation of drift and its effect on social scientific methodology has merit, the work ultimately romanticises the drifter and ignores the tension between drift and stability.

Conceptually, the instability of drift 'is the consequence and of late modernity, the price to be paid for the predations of neoliberal social policy, global social inequality, and high-speed social change' (Ferrell 2018, p. 10). Ferrell acknowledges that the precariousness of life in contemporary society is marked by constant displacement. The migrant worker, the refugee and the temporary employee are evidence of the lives led by people who are adrift. In the final chapters, drifters are conceived of as ghosts—metaphorically and literally—as modernity reshapes architecture, agriculture and production, abandoning the memory of past lives and experiences, the detritus of temporary residence and movement and the corpses of those forced to improvise their lives through a state of precarity. Such critiques are spread throughout the work; however, the main thrust is in the theoretical possibility of drift as challenge and dissent.

Ferrell argues that the drifter is dangerous, as they challenge the assumptions of stability, the control of bureaucratic capitalism and the state and norms of 'polite' society. The drifter engages in a kind of transgression specifically because they are adrift, crossing 'boundaries as they are encoded in individual identity, as they are enforced within sedentary associations—and as they are mapped into spatial arrangements' (Ferrell 2018, p. 45). As a cultural outsider, the drifter is both excluded and chooses to exclude themselves from normative society. This provides them with a keen ability to critique the very society that rejects them. In this sense, drift provides a possibility for unique forms of organisation and action against the conditions that caused it. By way of example, Ferrell describes the way in which hobos of the early twentieth century were organised by the IWW to engage in struggles over labour and free speech. The spontaneity of these fights is also evidenced by contemporary activists fighting the injustices of the world;

everything from the organisation of contingent labour to gender inequality. Drift provides a framework, or lack thereof, that allows movements to adapt to the circumstances of their cultural and historic milieu and to rebel with a spirit of play and creativity.

The combination of danger, resistance, spontaneity and play is embodied for Ferrell in the contemporary train-hopping gutter punk. Following the American hobo tradition, gutter punks are intentionally homeless members of the punk subculture who travel as stowaways on freight trains. The lifestyle of the gutter punk is inherently one of drift—many come to the subculture from troubled families and abusive situations. Their lifestyle places them in constant violation of the law and their subcultural affiliation alienates them from mainstream society. However, in this position, gutter punks also embody the affirmative aspects of drift, such as spontaneity, ingenuity, patience and an appreciation of life from the perspective of the ‘outsider’. Ferrell recounts his time hopping trains with a gutter punk named Zeke and discusses the process of unlearning the assumptions made by ‘stable’ society and the establishment of the unique perspective that drift provides. His portrayal of Zeke, and by extension gutter punks in general, is deeply sympathetic and humanising, but ultimately romantic. Ferrell celebrates the freedom of the gutter punks and their perspective on life without the context of the larger subcultural milieu in which they operate and the often contentious dynamics that it constructs.

This is the key weakness of the work. By theorising and discussing the concept of drift, there is little acknowledgement of the interactive processes that take place on the margins of society; between radical activists and subculturalists who may be at odds due to their relationships with drift and precarity. At the beginning of the book, Ferrell acknowledges a series of dialectics of drift—old versus new phenomenon, dependency versus autonomy, individuality versus community and hope versus despair—however, there is little discussion of the conflictual relationship between the drifters who voluntarily engage in drift and those who seek stability. Ferrell briefly mentions the tension between gutter punks and ‘house’ punks, a term of some derision for punks who do not assume the drifter lifestyle; however, the dynamics of this are not explored in detail. There is no mention of how gutter punks often rely on the relative stability (insofar as they are housed or participate in the economy) of house punks to provide the framework for their subculture and temporary weigh stations in the gutter punks’ lives of adventure. There is no discussion of the tension between the often-symbolic critique of activists who engage in ‘cultural’ forms of protest and those who work towards establishing prefigurative spaces and practices of ‘dual power’. This tension has been at the centre of anarchist debate for most of the last two decades, as the movement attempts to reconcile its veneration of the individual and insurrectionary standpoint against the practical work of movement building and durable change. In this sense, from an activist or subcultural perspective, drift may be most useful as a point of analysis, rather than as a prescription for change.

Correspondence: Stanislav Vysotsky, Assistant Professor, Sociology, Criminology and Anthropology Department, University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, 800 West Main St, Whitewater, WI 53212, United States. Email: vysotsks@uww.edu